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Feminist Struggle in Pakistan: A Battle for Women Rights

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Abstract: *The equal rights movements ushered by minorities, races, ethnicities and classes have gained momentum and achieved some success in past. As the world moves on to the eradication of disparities and procurement of more advanced rights, feminism is in the spotlight, advocating for equal rights for women, who are hardly seen as part of societies dominated by men. In order to secure their basic rights, women began to claim that they were persecuted and treated as second-class citizens by patriarchy-dominated societies. This research paper sheds light on the feminist struggle and activism in Pakistan considering the historical background, and various methodological approaches, and brings forth major findings that need to be addressed. The article employed mixed-research methods integrating a qualitative approach based on scholarly literature, policy formulation, surveys, and interviews and draws analysis about the role of feminist activism in raising awareness against the oppressive norms, culture, and traditions of Pakistan.*

Key Words: Patriarchy, Women's Rights, Secular

Introduction

Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* mentioned that 'women have a social constraint owing to their sex thus it seems paradoxical for them to compete with men' (Friedan, 1963). The struggle for women's rights and gender equality in Pakistan has a long and complex history, entwined with cultural, religious and socioeconomic factors. Despite facing many challenges from the traditionally conservative society, feminists in Pakistan strived to alter the social landscape to promote women's empowerment and combat discrimination. The feminist challenges of each age emerged at specific times in national and global history. In Pakistan, women's activism started soon after the partition, and the purpose of their struggle was the issues of social welfare such as the rehabilitation of refugees

(Saigol, 2019). The current women's activism in the country is more dynamic and inclusive, incorporating people from various classes, cultures, religions and genders, insisting not only on traditional rights but also more advanced in their nature. Reaction to these demands particularly in the wake of the Aurat March displeased orthodox, conservative and even self-proclaimed liberals in the society. The mass mobilization in recent years is a testimony that women

in Pakistan are now ready to challenge the edifice of an oppressed society.

Historical Context of Feminism in Pakistan

The rise of feminism in national or global history depends upon the socio-political and historical background in which women were struggling at that time. Every feminist movement has unique and distinct demands based on the inequalities they are facing in their respective social fabric. Pakistan being a Muslim-majority country has adopted a more conservative approach to women's role and freedom in society even though some were opposite to the injunctions of Islam. Every segment of the society incorporated the issue according to their own class, culture, race and ethnicity. The early 20th century started determining women's role in the subcontinent, particularly in Muslim communities. An organization named the Anjuman-i-Khawateen-i-Islam was established in Lahore. Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz, proposed a memorandum for rights in the Round Table Conference. It was the result of these efforts that women were enfranchised and granted reserved seats in elections. Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan played a remarkable role in determining rights for women in a newly independent country by establishing different

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organizations such as the All Pakistan Women Association (APWA). The earlier 20th century has been considered as a crossroad for women's activism. These were the times when the right to vote was granted to women in the USA and the United Kingdom. Fatima Jinnah was the first woman in Pakistan to contest the election against a dictator.

After the abrogation of the 1956 constitution, General Ayub Khan assumed the power. He banned all political parties and subjugated dissent-oriented voices. Despite the presence of women politicians and activists, his era should be considered a stagnant period for the feminist struggle in Pakistan. The prominent women active in politics or society were disintegrated and not properly organised in a form of movement. However, the Muslim Family Law Ordinance (MFLO) promulgated in 1961 gave legal strength and directly affected the rights of women in Pakistan. This law incorporated the issues pertaining to marriage registration, for second marriage consent of first wife and divorce rights to women (Mushtaq et al, 2016).

There has been no significant change in the status of women in Pakistan during the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto era except for provisions of some reserved seats in parliament. Article 25(2) was passed regarding no discrimination on the basis of sex and Article 35 guarantees state protection of women's rights in family affairs. A women's organization "Shirkat Gah" was established in 1975 to terminate the gender violence and economic exploitation of women. Thus, in the initial years of independence, there was no such vibrant women's activism in Pakistan. Instead, the nature of the social fabric was quite aggressive pertaining to women.

Zia-ul-Haq regime was considered as the dawn of women's oppression and activism. He enacted ordinances Zina and Hudood Ordinance 1979, which resulted in the emergence of the Women Action Forum in 1981. These laws restricted pieces of evidence of rape and enhanced the impossibility to prove them. During this era, a coordinated movement was initiated by Pakistani women lawyers who wrote feminist literature, and chanted slogans condemning the government in support of women: Hum Gunahgar Aurtain and Chaadar and Chardivari are examples.

The decade of 1988-1999 marked a turbulent era in the history of Pakistan. The ideological leanings of Nawaz Sharif tilted towards right-wing political parties, particularly religious. The conservative legacy of Zia-ul-Haq perpetuated the women's rights struggle. However, Benazir Bhutto marked the thumb in the chapters of history by becoming the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan. She helped build educational institutions and banks. Pakistan ratified the Convention against Women Discrimination (CEDAW)

in 1995 held in Beijing. In 2002, a National Plan of Action for the effective implementation of these commitments and a comprehensive policy for women's empowerment and development was launched.

General Pervaiz Musharraf came to power after the imposition of martial law in 1999. He laid the foundation of the 'enlightened moderation' era and heralded equal opportunities for women and men. During his rule, women were given important positions in the cabinet and were overall added to the political fabric of the country at all levels. The women's quota in the national and provincial legislature was increased to 17% and 33% in the local government system (Saira, 2009). Musharraf era marked the institutional corporation of women at the national level. An Action Plan (GRAP) characterized reforms on gender equality and a commission on the Status of Women was constituted. Many laws empowering women were enacted during his tenure such as the Women Protection Act of 2006 and the Honor Killing Law Act in 2004.

Asif Ali Zardari's government gave impetus to the laws protecting women from subjugation and violence. The law against harassment in 2010, the acid crime act in 2011, and the re-orientation of the Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) in 2012 have increased the scope of women's struggle against the violation of rights (Weiss, 2010).

Role of Women in Contemporary Pakistani Society

Education

The 1973 constitution suggests compulsory and free education under Article 25-A for five to sixteen years of children. Being one of the most populated countries in the world, Pakistan 40 per cent of women are uneducated, while, 13 million girls are out of school yet (Osama, 2021). The situation is more alarming in rural areas orchestrated by social and cultural impediments. Fewer schools in the vicinity and the lack of willingness of parents to send their daughters to schools that are in far-fledged areas are a few reasons. Particularly, in Punjab women in other provinces are bound to work at home before and after marriage. Their participation in the country's economy through a job or any sort of labour is considered an unethical and unIslamic practice. Thousands of children have lost their lives while studying in schools and colleges. Extremist groups are against women's education. The least share in the fiscal budget makes it unfeasible for the government to disseminate the educational

infrastructure in disadvantaged and backward areas of Pakistan.

Health

According to a survey (PDHS 2017-18), 1 out of 3 children give birth at home, and this proportion is 19% in urban areas while soaring to 41% in rural areas (NIPS, 2019). The majority of the rural and basic health units (RHU & BHU) are not functional. The number of maternal deaths stands at the third largest in the world. One of the most serious problems that needs urgent attention is the reproductive health system for women in the country. Despite receiving a huge sum as loans from international NGOs, the government has failed to develop a proper and functional healthcare system. Moreover, women in Pakistan have almost no right pertaining to their pregnancy or health which influence the development of their children.

Economic Opportunity

With a dwindling economy, Pakistan ranks one of the lowest globally and in South Asia for women's participation in the labour force. Pakistan stands at 145th position out of 156 countries for economic participation of females, as per the Gender Gap Index Report 2022 (WEF, 2023). In each society, women are considered essential for labour but due to gender-based discrimination, the majority of women stay within the informal economy. According to a survey, the employment-to-population ratio is 19.4 % for female and 64.1 % for male workers (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2021-2022). In the recent past, women's participation in the workforce has increased but the difference between men and women remains very high. The reason behind this gap is the role of men as breadwinners in the family. Women usually are dependent on permission from the patriarchy to work for a living and earn a livelihood. Societal pressure plays a significant role in determining the participation of a woman in the workforce. It is considered as against the male ego and honour if a woman earns more challenging the traditional norm of man being the breadwinner. Moreover, the culture of harassment at public places is conventional where higher management staff and colleagues exploit the vulnerability of women by passing unsuitable and inappropriate remarks often sexually harassing them. Another major factor for low women participation is the lack of separate facilities like transportation, offices, and universities that would ensure a safe and sound environment for women to work. Lack of infrastructure risks verbal and physical harassment and prevents them from working in public places.

Politics

The role of women in Pakistani politics remains substantial. They face multi-faceted challenges like mud-clinging due to misogyny, sexism and limited seats in provincial and national legislature. From the grassroots level to the federal level, female politicians face prejudices even from their colleagues' political leaders. There are assigned nominal portfolios in the cabinet that have no real power to exercise. Out of 272 women are allocated only 60 seats in the National Assembly. In provincial assemblies: Balochistan (3), Sindh (14), KPK (8), Punjab (35). However, there are no seats for women in the Federal Capital and FATA. Despite being half of the total population, women have only 4.5% of the minute share in the politics of Pakistan. The reason for such a low percentage is social dogmas attached to the role of females as political actors: voters, candidates, and leaders. Already, the women who are part of the political mechanism have to face criticism from the public or personal opposition from political parties. Patriarchal culture is so deeply embedded in Pakistan's social fabric that women politicians have to suffer character assassination and mud-clinging for their acts and appearances. They obtain little appreciation for even notable achievements (Anees, 2023).

Society

Being a culturally male-dominated country, women in Pakistan are incapacitated to become part of mainstream society. The prevailing structure places significant expectations on them to conform according to patriarchal norms and traditions. Women are well aware that deviation from these societal clutches could jeopardize their family's reputation. Despite adherence to conservative dress codes they still face public harassment and sexual abuse from sexually deprived men. Violence in the form of honour killing and acid attacks on females from society or family members are tragically common. Instead of punishing the culprit through the legal justice system, parents often choose to stay quiet, to preserve family respect. The lack of women's support leads them to constrain socially determined boundaries. In public places of work, women are paid less than their male counterparts. Enacting laws alone is insignificant to bring any real change. Instead, a coordinated effort through awareness is needed to change the attitudes of citizens. Despite the challenges, Pakistani women have shown tremendous potential and talent, with examples like Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, Malala Yousafzai, and Benazir Bhutto. These success stories demonstrate that Pakistani women can excel in desired fields.

Women's Rights and Legal Framework in Pakistan

The legal system of Pakistan underpins the traditional patriarchal dominance over society. All laws including inheritance and marriage choose men to consider men as the sole breadwinner. However, discrimination on the basis of gender and sex is prohibited by the 1973 constitution of Pakistan. There exists a law at the international level that inveighs against any sort of discrimination or violence by men. Male dominance over society is basically the cultural and religious norm of South Asian societies. It has also been legitimized by the laws and customs. Since the upsurge of the current wave of feminism in the world, Pakistan also has made significant advancements on the issue of women's rights and gender inequality. Still, there are a significant number of impediments that need to be addressed. However, these are some major legal binding for women's rights laid by the 1973 constitution of Pakistan:

1. Article-25, of the constitution prohibits any discrimination on the basis of sex and provides protection and equality for all before the law.
2. employment equality in all sectors and access to public places
3. Article 32 has guaranteed the rights to women for representation in local government elections
4. Article 35 mandated the government to provide protection to the child, mother, and the family
5. Articles 51 and 106 proclaimed the reserved seats for women in the legislature.

Faith and Feminism

The 9/11 attack stirred a debate regarding Islam and its practices. A false idea of religion was propelled to justify the incident and to start the War on Terrorism in Afghanistan. Islam was branded as a religion based on radical ideology in which women are being victimized as subjugated creatures having no fundamental rights and freedom. The first reason behind this confusion was the amalgamation of Muslim culture with the teachings of Islam, both are different in their nature. The second reason was the ambiguous ideological foundations adopted by some of the Muslim countries like Pakistan where the state religion contradicts the culture, traditions, and norms of the society. There is no doubt that women are being oppressed in these countries under the tutelage of the dominant patriarchy. However, these practices of violence are also against the injunctions of Islam.

Since independence women in Pakistan have also faced exploitation at the hands of a male segment of the society. Those who are battling for their rights are considered as misled and brainwashed elite women damaging the religion and culture of the country. Generally, the feminist movement in Pakistan is divided between two major discourses Islam and secularism. Those who advocate Islamic feminism primarily focus on the re-orientation of Islamic teachings with a main focus on a female-oriented approach. This segment include a rural, lower and upper-middle-class segment of women in society. Most of their demands are based on the right to education, freedom of choice in marriage, right to choose a profession, end to domestic violence and public harassment. The feminists who adhere to the secular principles incorporate urban and the elite segment of society and consider women's rights as a non-religious issue. These women are proponents of the Western form of feminism and demand more exclusive rights pertaining to body, social conduct, and equity in all spheres of life.

A secular feminist believes that the provision of fundamental rights on the basis of religion necessitates a patriarchal structure, while different interpretations of religious texts like the Quran put a curb on women's rights in a conservative society. Thus, state religion has nothing to do with the rights and freedom of citizens. This is the reason that Aurat March demands and sentiments against this movement stir an anti-feminist response in Pakistan. All these notions whether secularist or Islamist are dichotomous and misconstrued. The thought process behind Aurat March was based on a secular agenda (Mehreen, 2014). Secular feminism seems to be more democratic in nature and advocates the rights of all women including non-Muslims as well. A large portion of women in Pakistan found their ideological leanings in secular feminism due to its pluralism and worldwide acceptance.

However, Islamic feminism propagates the reinterpretation of the modern Islamic-feminist perspective through carrying out *ijtihad*. Islam has granted unprecedented socio-economic and political rights to women. The current situation of women in Muslim countries is more due to non-abidance of the teachings of Islam in letter and spirit, misinterpretation of religious texts, and absence of *ijtihad*. Even countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Turkey have had female heads of state/government thus employing that Muslim societies, across the political spectrum, allow and promote female roles. The battle for women's rights can be won only if the feminist movement impersonates women and the society in

which it operates because Pakistan was formed on both secular and Islamic principles (Shah, 2014).

Challenges and the Way Forward

It is an inevitable reality that women all across the world are facing discrimination and are not getting their equal rights. Thousands of women gathered for the annual Aurat March in major cities of Pakistan, demanding an end to discrimination and violence against women. The purpose of this March is to publicize and address the issues concerning women in Pakistan. Major demands include an end to domestic and public violence, and an end to discriminatory participation of women in politics, education, and the economy. The backlash against this March and the overall feminist struggle comes from orthodox and conservative segments of society primarily from the rural-middle class.

The March has been perceived as against men supported by NGOs having a grand foreign agenda of damaging the very fabric of society. Furthermore, non-state actors like the Taliban also criticize this type of activism under the guise of Islam and Sharia declared it a Western conspiracy. The opposition to women's activism underscores the urgency to challenge the patriarchal narrative surrounding religion that wrongly portrays feminism as incompatible with Islam. Achieving gender equality in Pakistan is essential for its long-term development as a resilient democracy capable of addressing violent extremism, resolving conflicts peacefully, and contributing to regional stability amidst constant international security threats. However, these steps help to strengthen and further expand the scope of this ideology in the conservative society of Pakistan.

- I. The most important thing to do is to shift the epicentre of this movement from urban to rural areas because these are the places where an actual change is required. People need to be educated that this ideology is not against men but about women's empowerment. Without education, particularly in rural areas, it would not be possible to change the prevailing mindsets of people who believe that somehow men have dominance over women.
- II. The second thing is the de-radicalization of this new ideology. Unfortunately, after radicalising religion, and two nation theory and now some extremist elements are trying to radicalise the feminist struggle for rights. It also becomes

easy for men to play religious here too in order to counter this new narrative. Instead of changing the minds of the public this type of approach would further aggravate the situation and might bring forth a clash between two genders.

- III. Third, some people may disagree here but a Western form of feminism will never become successful in Pakistan. This society has different dynamics having Islam as a religion at its core and in the near future people are not ready to compromise on it. My Body My Right type slogans, in whatever context they may be, do not appeal to a common man who belongs to a lower-middle-class family sitting in a village. Moreover, Pakistan is not a developed country where educated and liberal minds can interpret them in their true essence. Thus, a bottom-to-top approach with easily acceptable demands like the right to education, freedom to choose a profession, and end to domestic and public violence can bring consensus among the public.
- IV. In the end, the role of media is significant. There are areas in Pakistan where people have access only to television which deeply influences their minds. Private and public channels should stop broadcasting content based on women's victimization neither in the hands of men nor women. Instead of promoting showing women as victims, they must introduce non-traditional content by giving more powerful and leading roles to women.

Conclusion

The feminist movement in Pakistan represents women's relentless struggle for rights that evolved since independence. The patriarchal structure of society subjugated women and hindered their progress. However, with the upsurge of waves of feminism, Pakistani women have also shown their resilience to fight the battle for the achievement of an equitable status in society. They have challenged legal to traditional gender roles and repudiated the perpetuated domestic and public violence against them. This struggle has created a storm of defiance and generated a debate among all segments of society. The battle for rights is not over yet and this time Pakistani women are not ready to compromise their equitable and prosperous future which guarantees rights and freedom from the cruel clutches of oppression

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